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ABSTRACT

Language and literacy issues in India are reviewed in terms of background, steps taken to combat illiteracy, and some problems associated with literacy. The following facts are noted: India has 106 languages spoken by more than 685 million people, there are several minor script systems, a major language has different dialects, a language may use different scripts, several languages have varieties due to caste or religion, and many minor languages do not have a script. More than 63 percent of the total population is illiterate, especially among the rural population and among women. Literacy campaigns since 1937 are described and reasons for their failure are discussed including both organizational and conceptual problems. India's multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural nature is cited as a cause of many of the problems involved in implementing successful literacy programs, since there is a conflict regarding the medium of literacy instruction. Examples are cited, however, of some minority groups that are demanding to receive literacy in the dominant state language. It is concluded that more information on reading research, ways to facilitate communicative competence, and data collection are needed. Contains 9 references. (LB)

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LANGUAGE AND LITERACY: THE CASE OF INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

According to the 1981 census, there are 106 languages spoken by more than 685.18 million people in India. The Indian languages fall into 4 main families -- Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman. The 1981 Census identifies 20 Indo-Aryan and 17 Dravidian languages accounting for 98.1% of the total population of India. Out of these, 15 languages are included in the VIIIth schedule of the Indian Constitution, commonly known as the national languages of India (see Table 1). In addition to the diversity of languages, there is also the diversity of scripts. As Pattanayak (1980) observes, there are ten major script systems:

Bengali-Assamese-Manipuri	Malayalam
Devanagari	Oriya
Gujarati	Tamil
Gurumukhi	Perso-Arabic
Kannada-Telugu	Roman

Additionally, there are several minor script systems, and new scripts are constantly being proposed for religious, political, ethnic and aesthetic reasons.

In addition to the large number of languages and scripts, there are several other factors that contribute to the complexity, eg.,

--- a major language has different dialects, eg., Hindi (Avadhi, Bhojpuri, Magahi, Maithili, Bundelkhandi, etc.);
--- a language uses different scripts, eg., Konkani uses 4 different scripts (Kannada, Devanagari, Malayalam, and Roman);
--- several languages have variaties due to caste, religion, diglossia, etc., eg., Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, etc.;

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--- many of the minor langauges do not have a script;

LITERACY PROFILE OF INDIA

According to the 1981 census, India still has a staggering number of illiterate people. Out of a total population of 685.18 million, 437.63 million were illiterate (i.e., 63.8% of the total population). There are more illiterates among the rural population and among women. In its report of 1988, the Directorate of Adult Edcuation points out that while the population increase between 1901 to 1981 was 25%, the increase in literacy rate was only 6.68%. The rest of the details are given in Table 2. The state-wise and sex-wise distribution of literate and illiterate populations for 1981 are summarized in Table 3. In 80 years, the proportion of literate people has not gone up appreciablly. We cannot blame it simply on the tremenduous growth of population or the British rule in India spanning for over 200 years. In the following section, I will present the steps taken to combat illiteracy in independent India.

LITERACY CAMPAIGNS

It was during 1937-1942 that literacy became part of the policy agenda of the government. The Central Advisory Board of Education appointed a committee to consider India's literacy policy, which submitted its report in 1940. Literacy, it proclaimed,

> "should not be considered to be an end in itself, but a movement of further education. The teaching of literacy, -- should be closely related to the learner's occupation, his personal interests, as well as to his social and economic conditions" (Bhola 1987:250).

This question took a back seat during the independence movement.

India's independence in 1947 forced the leaders to pay attention to other pressing social, political, and economic issues. The question of Adult Literacy became a high priority in 1977 when the Janata government replaced the administration of Indira Gandhi. The National Adult Education Program (NAEP) was instituted as part of the Fifth Five-Year plan of 1978-1983. It sought to cover 100 million adult men and women in the age group of 15 to 35. The idea was to cover the entire country and to have projects in all of the then 22 states and 9 Union Territories. The curricular goals were conceived in three parts: literacy, functionality, and awareness. It was envisaged that learners would be provided 300 to 350 hours of instruction over a period of 9 months, utilizing the spoken language of learners as the language of literacy. With Indira Gandhi's return to power in January 1980, several changes were made. First, the name of NAEP was changed to AEP (Adult Education Program). Second, there were new figures for illiterates to be covered by the program and new time schedules to cover them. The target now was to enroll 110 million illiterate adults in the age group 15 to 35 in ten years, 1980 to 1990. Third, the new program envisaged the instructional process to last three years, with the following three phases:

Phase 1 of about 300 to 350 hours spread over a year, including basic literacy, general education with emphasis on health and family planning, functional programs relating to learners' vocations, and familiarity with laws and policies affecting the learners.

Phase 2 of about 150 hours spread over a year, to reinforce literacy skills and their use in daily life. This phase included appreciation of science in relation to one's environment, elements of geography, history, and the

country's cultural heritage. It would also contribute to the improvement of all vocational skills.

Phase 3 of about 100 hours spread over a year, to achieve a reasonable degree of self-reliance.

Following the New Education Policy adopted by the parliament in 1986, the Government of India launched the National Literacy Mission (NLM) which seeks to make 110 million people in the age group of 15 to 35 functionally literate (a la Paulo Friere 1970) by the end of 1995. The presceribed levels of literacy in the three R's are presented in Table 4.

EVALUATION

In 1981, the Directorate of Adult Education (DAE) summarized the results of six regional studies of the NAEP/AEP program conducted during 1980 to 1981 and pointed reasons for the failure of literacy programs. In addition to these reports, several scholars have discussed the reasons for the failure of literacy programs in the past, despite the efforts of nearly 700 governmental and voluntary agencies. For ease of discussion, these reasons may be grouped into conceptual and organizational categories. The organizational problems are:

--- enrollment of women was low, enrollment of scheduled castes/ tribes, was however, encouraging;
--- most in the age group of 26 to 35 were underrepresented, most visible group of learners were the 15 to 25 year olds;
--- classes were in constant flux--100% to 20% in attendance;
--- instructors were unqualified, lacked training; paid little;
--- too few women instructors, but many from scheduled castes/ tribes;
--- delays in the distribtion of teaching materials;
--- apathy on the part of the state governments (Dighe, Mathur, and Chand, 1981).
--- lack of trained personnel;
--- lack of co-ordination between various agencies (S.N. Sridhar 1981:228).

In addition to the above, there are several conceptual problems.

--- inability to motivate learners, high drop-out rate;
--- failure to ensure retention of literacy beyond the initial stages;
--- the tendency to teach adults as though they were children; (S.N. Sridhar 1981:228).
--- the absence of systematic evaluation, analysis, and follow up.
--- the tendency to make the materials too dry and drab, with emphasis on teaching the alphabet without regard to the grading (sequencing) of familiar vocabulary which captures the interest of the learner;
--- the irrelevance of the content (and language) of the curriculum to the daily lives of the learners;
--- failure to involve linguists in the evaluation of primers and other materials;
--- absence of research studies on the reading problems of adults, the problems of scripts and spellings, the choice of appropriate variety of language to be used in the primer. (Bh. Krishnamurti 1988, ms.)

In the following section, some problems associated with literacy will be discussed along with solutions and recommendations.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several Asian countries have made a great deal of progress in imparting mass literacy and these examples are often used to criticize India's dismal record in this area. While there is no denying that the progress has been dismal, it must be kept in mind that in the Indian context, the multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural nature of the country, along with its democratic structure, does not permit the use of only one language for spreading literacy (as has been done in countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines). In addition to the problems discussed in the section above, there are several other problems, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which will be discussed next, with suggestions for future research.

CHOICE OF LANGUAGE:

There exists a conflict regarding the medium of literacy

instruction, between the linguists' views and those of the groups targeted to receive literacy. While linguists promote the mother tongue as the only viable medium for imparting literacy, this conflicts with the low functional load of the mother tongues vis-a-vis the major regional languages, thus reducing learners' motivation. It has been reported that in India, there are many instances and situations in which literacy skills are imparted through a second language. The vast Hindi area has many so-called major dialects--Bhojpuri, Maithili, Avadhi, Magahi, Kumaoni, etc., but the language of literacy is Standard Hindi (Khariboli). This practice of initiating literacy in a second language has several negative effects on the language and social organizations: (Srivastava 1984:35).

--- it leaves many learners at the level of semi-literacy;
--- creates intellectual imbalances between standard language literacy and mass literacy;
--- downgrades the learners' mother tongue;
--- interferes with the channel for cross-cultural communication that could serve as a bridge between oral culture and written culture;
--- it generates disharmonious relationships between functions of literacy (ie., what literacy does for learners) and uses of literacy (ie., what learners do with literacy skills).

A case in point is the the Mehboobnagar (Andhra Pradesh) experiment, a hightly successful project involving women's literacy, which adopted the local vernacular variety of Telugu. The women learners were able to read and write the vernacular but were unable to do the same in the standard variety which is widely used in print. They were not able to transfer the skills.

However, despite the liguists' reservations, there are signficant groups of minorities, tribal and non-tribal, who demand to receive literacy in the dominant state language and/or

Hindi (i.e., a second language) should be the medium. In this respect, the attitudinal survey reported by Srivastava (1984) is worth noting. Students were asked, in urban and village settings, to rank in order of their preference selected passages specially written in the following 5 language styles: (i) Hindi; (ii) English; (iii) Dialect (Bhojpuri); (iv) Dialect mixed Hindi; and (v) English mixed Hindi. The results are presented in Table 5, and it shows that:

(a) both groups (village and urban students) accord high ranking to Hindi and English;
(b) both groups accord a very low ranking to dialect and code-mixed variety of Hindi.

It is quite obvious that learners--whether they belong to rural areas or urban centers--prefer to acquire literacy skills in languages and styles which are controlled by elitist structures. I came to a similar conclusion in an attitudinal survey I conducted in 1987 among faculty and students belonging to various tribal groups in Bihar. Asked about the language(s) they would prefer as medium of instruction, Hindi was the first preference for an overwhelming majority. English was next. Both faculty and students alike felt that the mother tongue (tribal languages) should be the medium at the elementary levels, but Hindi should be introduced at the secondary school level. The results of the survey are presented in table 6.

The linguists' advocacy of initial literacy instruction in the mother tongue is based on the assumption that literacy skills are easily transferred from the non-standard dialect/minority language to the standard dialect or major regional language. However, this assumption needs to be validated.

In order to resolve this contradiction between the linguists' policy and the minority communities' pragmatic demands, more systematic research is needed in this area, specially in the light of the fact that the minorities themselves are demanding education through the standard language. Cross-cultural studies have shown that the motivation of the learner conditioned by community values is a stonger determinant of success than the choice of a language variety recommended by the linguist (Krishnamurti 1989, ms.).

INITIATE READING RESEARCH

Input from linguists, educational psychologists, and reading specailsts is needed regarding the difficulty/ease of learning the various Indian scripts. At present, there is very little basic research on reading with reference to Indian languages available. Although the Indian scripts are by and large quite phonetic, they are nevertheless suited to the representation of the standard, formal varieties rather than the vernaculars. In many cases, the scripts are complicated and cry out for simplification. However, as is well known, script reform is horrendously complex and cannot be counted on. It is therefore, all the more imperative that serious research be initiated into the reading process of Indian languages, and problem areas and better teaching methods identified. For minor languages without writing systems, the present policy of adapting orthography of the dominant regional language or the standard language seems pragmatic and sound. This will facilitate transition to the dominant regional language.

FACILITATE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Having noted the linguistic problems, it is only fair to point out that lack of script is not the major problem because most speakers speak a dialect or language whose standard version does have a script. Yet speakers of these languages comprise a very significant proportion of the illiterate people in India. So the problem is not entirely linguistic, it is functional.

Functional motivation is lacking because relevance of literacy is not made clear. The concept of functionally relevant literacy is acknowledged but is not systematically incorporated in the work. Ethnographic studies are needed to determine what type of literacy is needed that will be useful for the population in question. In rural areas, the oral tradition is fairly popular. Reading is a group activity (where one person, usually the local teacher or the priest, reads from the scriptures). For literacy, adaptation of materials used during group reading may be more relevant/interesting, and would also motivate the learners. For example, NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) is currenly involved in producing primers for migrant populations of construction workers, using songs they sing while laying bricks (personal communication, Indira Malani).

There are no materials in the dialect of the illiterate learner. He/she feels disenfranchised.

Functional literacy is designed to give the learner skills necessary to perform more efficiently in the environment in which he/she lives. A survey of literacy materials in Indian languages, particularly primers, shows that they are poorly designed. Many primers follow the model of children's text-

books, others are too drab and uninteresting, paying little attention to enhancing communicative competence in adult learners. The primers use words which do not represent an authentic expressions of the adult learner's world. The words, which often have to be memorized as lists, are rarely used in the context of sentences. Even when they are, they fail to hang together beyond the isolated sentences they are fitted into. They represent language, not communication, vocabulary but not thought. Often the materials are not relevant to the experiences of the rural populations. The topics and themes covered often deal with middle class values and urban settings, thus contribuing to the alienation (Tickoo and Tickoo 1979:17).

LINGUSITC METHODS APPLIED TO LITERACY

Research on language teaching over the last fifty years has identified a number of areas of language teaching in which the application of linguistic principles have been found to contribute to more efficient learning. Linguists can aid in tasks such as determining the proper sequencing of materials (progressing from the least difficult to the more difficult), the gradation of texts, contextualization of linguistic structures, and in sequencing on the basis of structural complexity, phonological analysis of writing systems, among others. These insights could easily be applied to improve literacy materials.

BETTER DATA COLLECTION

Better ways of collecting data, conducting surveys are needed. While a great deal of materials exist on the goals and objectives of the literacy programs initiated, the number of

Adult Educational Centers, and the number of adults that are served by these centers, very little empirical data is available on the number of adults who actually attend classes, how many actually graduate, and practically nothing on how the literacy has improved the lots of these adults. We need proper survey methods to get accurate figures for above-mentioned points. In addition, we also need data on "needs assessment": what the masses want in terms of literacy, what they want to use it for, and how it can best be delivered.

TABLE 1: THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES: NUMBERS AND PERCENTAGES

LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	PERCENTAGE
Hindi	264,189,057	39.94
Telugu	54,226,227	8.20
Bengali	51,503,085	7.79
Marathi	49,624,847	7.50
Tamil	44,730,389	6.76
Urdu	35,323,282	5.34
Gujarati	33,189,039	5.02
Kannada	26,887,837	4.06
Malayalam	25,952,966	3.92
Oriya	22,881,053	3.46
Punjabi	18,588,400	2.81
Kashmiri	3,174,684	0.48
Sindhi	1,946,278	0.29
Assamese*	70,525	0.01
Sanskrit	2,946	N

* No Census was taken in Assam.

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